

CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE HABITAT RELATIONSHIPS SYSTEM
maintained by the
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
and supported by the
CALIFORNIA INTERAGENCY WILDLIFE TASK GROUP
Database Version 8.1 (2005)

B303 Downy Woodpecker *Picoides pubescens*
Family: Picidae Order: Piciformes Class: Aves

Written by: G. Ahlborn, T. Harvey
Reviewed by: N. Johnson
Edited by: G. Ahlborn

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common, yearlong resident of riparian deciduous and associated hardwood and conifer habitats. Occurs throughout the state, usually below 1800 m (5900 ft). Absent from southern California desert regions. Loss of riparian woodlands and snags has caused a decline in numbers in recent decades (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Beetles, ants, caterpillars, and other larvae comprise 75-80% of the annual diet. Also eats cambium, berries and other fruits, nuts and seeds, including dogwood, serviceberry, poison-oak. Forages on trunks and branches of small trees, usually 2.7 to 20 m (9-65 ft) above ground (Jackson 1970). Also forages in shrubs and occasionally tall herbs. Probes, pecks, gleans for insects; occasionally hawks insects (Bent 1939).

Cover: Closely associated with riparian softwoods. Frequents adjacent hardwood and conifer habitats and orchards. Uses tree and shrub foliage for cover; also digs cavities for nesting and roosting.

Reproduction: Excavates nest cavity in snag or dead branch 1.3 to 15 m (4-50 ft) above ground. Prefers aspen for nest cavity; must be at least 23 cm (9 in) dbh (Bent 1939, Lawrence 1967). Usually excavates a new nest cavity each year.

Water: No data found, but frequents riparian habitats.

Pattern: Uses riparian deciduous and adjacent mixed forest habitats. Requires abundant snags, and tree/shrub, tree/herbaceous, and shrub/herbaceous ecotones; prefers aspens.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: May move upslope after breeding season into conifer habitats as high as 2380 m (7800 ft).

Home Range: Territory and home range apparently the same.

Territory: In Ontario, Lawrence (1967) observed 2 breeding territories of 2.0 and 3.2 ha (5 and 9 ac).

Reproduction: As with most woodpeckers, courtship includes the male drumming on dry, resonant limbs to attract a female (Bendire 1895). Breeding occurs from late March to early

September; peak nesting activity May through June. Average clutch 4-5 eggs; range 3-7. Incubation 12-13 days. Both parents incubate and care for altricial young. Usually 1 brood per yr (Dawson 1923).

Niche: Potential intraspecific competition for food between male and female apparently reduced by sexual differences in feeding behavior (Jackson 1970, Kilham 1970). Austin (1976) reviewed sexual dimorphism among woodpeckers. Interspecific competition for food between hairy and downy woodpeckers may be reduced by feeding on different species of trees (Kisiel 1972). In Idaho, Ligon (1970, 1973) reported competition for food between white-headed and downy woodpeckers. Abandoned snag and tree cavities used by many other species.

REFERENCES

- Austin, G. T. 1976. Sexual and seasonal differences in foraging of ladder-backed woodpeckers. *Condor* 78:317-323.
- Bendire, C. 1895. Life histories of North American birds. Vol. 2. Smithsonian Contrib. to Knowledge No. 985. Smithsonian Inst., Washington DC. 518pp.
- Bent, A. C. 1939. Life histories of North American woodpeckers. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 174. 334pp.
- Dawson, W. L. 1923. The birds of California. 4 Vols. South Moulton Co., San Diego. 2121pp.
- Grinnell, J., and A. H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. Pac. Coast Avifauna No. 27. 608pp.
- Jackson, J. A. 1970. A quantitative study of the foraging ecology of downy woodpeckers. *Ecology* 51:318-323.
- Kilham, L. 1970. Feeding behavior of downy woodpeckers I. Preference for paper birches and sexual differences. *Auk* 87:544-556.
- Kisiel, D. S. 1972. Foraging behavior of *Dendrocopos villosus* and *D. pubescens* in eastern New York state. *Condor* 74:393-398.
- Lawrence, L. de K. 1967. A comparative life-history study of four species of woodpeckers. *Ornithol. Monogr.* No. 5. 156pp.
- Ligon, J. D. 1970. Behavior and breeding biology of the red cockaded woodpecker. *Auk* 87:255-278.
- Ligon, J. D. 1973. Foraging behavior of the white-headed woodpecker in Idaho. *Auk* 90:862-869.s. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 174. 334pp..